DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 744 EA 028 309

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TITLE	Shared Decision Making.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oreg.; National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	97
NOTE	5p.
CONTRACT	RP93002006
AVAILABLE FROM	Educational Products, National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-3483 ($2.50; quantity discounts).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Proceedings (021) -- ERIC Publications (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
JOURNAL CIT	Research Roundup; v13 n3 Fall 1996
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Role; Decision Making; Educational Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; *Governance; Interprofessional Relationship; Leadership; *Participative Decision Making; *Principals; *Teacher Administrator Relationship

ABSTRACT

In shared decision making (SDM), principals collaborate with teachers and sometimes parents to take actions aimed at improving instruction and school climate. While research on SDM outcomes is still inconclusive, the literature shows that SDM brings both benefits and problems, and that the principal is a key figure. This brief offers a sampling of recent research on shared decision making: (1) "Shared Decision-Making" (Lynn Balster Liontos and Larry Lashway); (2) "Principals' Skills and Knowledge for Shared Decision-Making" (Kent Peterson, Kubilay Gok, and Valli D. Warren); (3) "Influences of Shared Decision-Making on School and Classroom Activity: Conversations with Five Teachers" (Gary A. Griffin); (4) "The Principal as Mini-Superintendent under Chicago School Reform" (Bruce R. McPherson and Robert L. Crowson); and (5) "The Fire Is Back! Principals Sharing School Governance" (Jo Blase and Joseph Blase). (LMI)

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ED 406 744

Research roundup
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
VOLUME 13, NUMBER 3
SPRING 1997

Shared Decision Making

Larry Lashway

As they struggle with the daily dilemmas of leadership, principals sometimes allow themselves daydreams in which their authority is unlimited and they can act without having to plead, lobby, or negotiate with anyone. Yet, for the past decade, many school leaders have willingly participated in a movement that asks them to share their power with teachers and parents.

This movement goes by many names—shared decision making, school-based management, shared governance—but the rationale is always the same: those who are closest to students are best equipped to make educational decisions.

In shared decision making (SDM), principals collaborate with teachers (and sometimes parents) to take actions aimed at improving instruction and school climate. In some cases, teachers or parents are formally given a slice of power; more commonly, principals retain their authority but commit themselves to govern through consensus.

Advocates of SDM claim it will improve student learning, create teacher satisfaction, and develop new forms of leadership. Does it deliver on these promises? After almost a decade of experimentation, researchers have begun to report their findings. While it is still too early to make definitive judgments, the literature shows that shared decision making brings both benefits and problems, and that the principal remains a key figure who must not only master new skills, but also make sense out of ambiguous new roles and relationships.

The works described below provide a representative sampling of recent research.

Lynn Balster Liontos and Larry Lashway review recent research on shared decision making, noting its limitations as well as its benefits.

Kent Peterson, Kubilay Gok, and Valli D. Warren describe three essential skills for principals using shared governance.

Gary Griffin examines the reasons why empowered teachers are slow to change core classroom practices.

R. Bruce McPherson and Robert Crowson discuss the way that legislated SDM has changed the principal's role in Chicago schools.

Jo Blase and Joseph Blase draw a portrait of shared decision making from the principal's point of view, based on interviews with nine exemplary school leaders.

Larry Lashway is an education writer commissioned by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management at the University of Oregon.

Liontos, Lynn Balster; and Lashway, Larry. **"Shared Decision-Making."** In *School Leadership: Handbook for Excellence*, third edition. Edited by Philip Piele and Stuart Smith: 226-250. Eugene, Ore.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1997. 432 pages. *Available from:* Publication Sales, ERIC/CEM, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207. (800) 438-8841 (no phone orders). $19.95 paper plus $4.00 shipping and handling.

Liontos and Lashway begin by noting the confusing terminology that leads some schools to discover belatedly that they aren't sure

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what shared decision making is. The most serious problem is the failure to recognize the difference between *decentralization* (which merely transfers authority from the district office to local schools) and *shared decision making* (which extends leadership opportunities to other stakeholders). The hallmark of true SDM is the belief that instruction will improve when those closest to the students are involved in making decisions.

The principal's role is crucial, requiring a major shift in leadership strategy. Leaders must be willing to let go of traditional authority roles, not only allowing teachers to have a greater voice, but helping to prepare them, providing support, and establishing an environment of trust. At the same time, they must be ready to step in if the process threatens to go off track. Too much of a hands-off attitude is seen as indifference; too assertive a role undermines collaboration.

The authors emphasize the importance of training. While teachers are knowledgeable in their own domain, their preparation seldom includes a heavy emphasis on collaborative decision making. SDM schools use a variety of methods to provide the necessary training, including outside consultants, "train the trainer" programs, and the use of specific training models.

Research to date shows mixed results for SDM. Most studies agree that collaboration improves teacher morale and school climate (although it may also increase frustration at times). However, there is much less evidence that SDM has a positive impact on student learning. The authors suggest that it may simply be too early for measurable results, but they also point out that SDM schools do not seem to be more innovative than traditional schools.

The final section shares lessons learned from SDM pioneers. Their key advice:

- Be as clear as possible about new procedures for making decisions.
- Provide time for teachers to make decisions.
- Provide adequate training for staff.
- Facilitate, but be prepared to take action.

The authors conclude that while SDM is not a panacea, it nonetheless has great potential and is likely to remain a key reform issue.

Peterson, Kent D.; Gok, Kubilay; and Warren, Valli D. **Principals' Skills and Knowledge for Shared Decision-Making.** Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1995. 9 pages. ED 386 827. *Available from:* ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 7420 Fullerton Rd., Suite 110, Springfield, VA 22153-2852. (800) 443-3742. $3.97.

The authors summarize their work with 24 schools that use SDM. Based on these schools' experiences, they describe three essential skills for principals.

First, principals must be able to help their schools develop a clear, shared educational vision. Without such a focus, planning and decision making will be fragmented and ineffective. In successful schools, principals talked enthusiastically—and often—about the school's mission and core values in language that all stakeholders could understand. They found multiple ways of expressing the vision, and they provided planning time for discussing and developing it.

Second, principals must develop effective structures and processes to support shared decision making. SDM puts participants into new roles, creating ambiguity and uncertainty. Effective SDM principals helped the staff develop specific structures for decision making. They developed methods of problem solving that kept the focus on instruction, and they used a wide variety of problem-solving methods and tools.

Third, principals must build strong and cohesive teams. Relatively few teachers have extensive preparation or experience in using collaborative skills; when conflict arises, participants do not have well established procedures to fall back on. In successful SDM schools, principals used retreats, conferences, and collaborative projects to build team cohesion, and provided systematic and continuous training in team decision making.

A key component of all these activities was the availability of sufficient time for administrators and teachers to engage in meaningful reflective dialogue. In exemplary schools, the authors note, a mix of formal training and reflective dialogue "produced some superbly functioning shared decision-making teams."

Griffin, Gary A. **"Influences of Shared Decision-Making on School and Classroom Activity: Conversations with Five Teachers."** *The Elementary School Journal* 96: 1 (September 1995): 29-45. EJ 510 577. *Available from:* University Microfilms International (UMI), Article Clearinghouse, PO Box 1346, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346. (800) 521-0600, ext. 2786. $11.00.

Shared decision making assumes that those closest to the classroom can make the best decisions about curriculum and instruction. However, research has often indicated that empowered teachers do not focus on substantive instructional issues.

Over a period of several years, Gary Griffin explored this issue in

multiple conversations with five teachers who were involved in restructuring efforts. Like other researchers, he found little evidence that SDM led to significant departures from standard classroom practice.

While teachers expressed enthusiasm and satisfaction with their new roles, they reported that empowered teachers tended to deal with schoolwide issues, particularly those that had been longstanding sore points, but that little attention was paid at the classroom level. Typical topics were assessment of student achievement, curriculum frameworks, and treating severe student problems. Griffin notes that while these are worthwhile topics, they did not lead teachers to reflect on their daily instructional practices.

In reviewing the conversations, he identified five themes that shed light on why SDM is slow to change classrooms:

First, the teachers had strong beliefs in their own competence. They were experienced, they worked hard, and they cared about students; thus, they saw little reason to question their effectiveness.

Second, despite the collaboration that came with SDM, teachers continued to view the classroom as a private domain. Their view of professionalism prevented them from questioning colleagues' teaching.

Third, even when teachers entertained private doubts about another teacher's practices, they adopted a live-and-let-live policy, recognizing that their own practices might be similarly critiqued.

Fourth, teachers had difficulty identifying anything resembling a universal standard of teaching excellence. They knew what worked for them, but hesitated to prescribe it for everyone; sometimes they seemed to doubt that *any* practices could be considered better than others.

Finally, teachers were overloaded. It was simply unrealistic to expect them to add extensive self-reflection to an already ample workload.

Thus, it appears that while shared decision making marks a significant shift in school culture, it does not automatically replace the old culture.

McPherson, R. Bruce; and Crowson, Robert L. **"The Principal as Mini-Superintendent under Chicago School Reform."** In *Reshaping the Principalship: Insights from Transformational Reform Efforts*. Edited by Joseph Murphy and Karen Seashore Louis. Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Corwin Press, 1994. 302 pages. *Available from:* Corwin Press, Inc., 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, CA 91320-2218. (805) 499-0721. $27.95.

In many schools, shared decision making has been initiated by principals who believed the time was ripe for new forms of governance. Occasionally, however, SDM has been legislated, leaving principals to cope with a suddenly transformed power structure.

In 1988, the Illinois state legislature decentralized the Chicago public school system by setting up local school councils, each consisting of parents, teachers, and the principal. These councils were vested with considerable authority, including the ability to hire and fire principals.

In this report, the authors summarize the results of interviews with 15 Chicago principals to find out how legislated SDM affected the way they did their job. The most significant finding was that the principal's role had shifted from instructional leader to mini-superintendent. Faced with relatively autonomous councils dominated by parents, school leaders had to spend more of their time "selling" decisions to groups not fully conversant with educational issues.

Where principals once worked to buffer schools from community demands, they now worked to integrate community wishes into the life of the school. Most of those interviewed had done so successfully and did not consider the councils to be a threat. In fact, they sometimes worried that the councils were too passive.

This new role was reinforced by the decline of the central office bureaucracy, which had been stripped by the legislature of much of its power. Most of the principals now considered the once-feared central office to be merely an annoyance and distraction. With freedom to become more entrepreneurial and imaginative, some principals were able to turn mandated school-improvement plans into tools for comprehensive reform.

Many of the principals expressed satisfaction with their new status. Although they had less job security, they felt that their hard work would be acknowledged more on the local level than it had been by the bureaucracy. They also now felt better able to shape their jobs to their interests and talents.

About ERIC

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system operated by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). The ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, one of 16 such units in the system, was established at the University of Oregon in 1966.

This publication was prepared by the Clearinghouse with funding from OERI, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. OERI-RR-93002006. No federal funds were used in the printing of this publication.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, 1787 Agate St., Eugene, Oregon 97403. Phone 1-800-438-8841.

Blase, Jo; and Blase, Joseph. **The Fire Is Back! Principals Sharing School Governance.** Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Corwin Press, 1997. 184 pages. *Available from:* Corwin Press, Inc., 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, CA 91320-2218. (805) 499-0721. $19.95.

For several years, the authors have been documenting the experiences of school leaders involved in shared governance. This book presents the results of in-depth interviews with nine exemplary principals, providing insights into the mechanics of SDM as well as its human meaning.

The book makes clear that shared governance provides complex challenges, including:

- Meeting increased demands on time;
- Learning when to "back off" and let teachers solve problems themselves; and
- Maintaining a focus on instruction.

If sharing power with teachers is difficult, sharing it with parents is even more of a challenge. Teachers may be uneasy about involving parents in candid discussions, and parents may be apathetic or intimidated. Some principals reported slow progress, while others found that they could build trust by keeping parents fully informed, listening carefully to them, and encouraging multiple forms of involvement.

Noting that SDM efforts sometimes stress peripheral issues over academic substance, the authors emphasize the importance of staying focused on instruction. It may be helpful to let teachers resolve minor issues at first, but principals must keep nudging the process in the right direction. Helpful tools include a clear vision statement, action research, continuous monitoring of results, and collaboration with parents.

A chapter on "The Inner Experience" documents the psychological challenges and rewards of SDM. The authors report that principals often struggle with role strain, particularly the fear of giving up control; ironically, when everything goes well, they begin to wonder if they're really needed. The major rewards are a sense of renewal and motivation as principals grow and watch others grow. Some even describe it as a spiritual experience.

Based on their work with the principals, the authors conclude that "a new democratic ideal of the principal-leader is emerging." The principals' testimony indicates that shared decision making is never easy, but that it is both workable and professionally fulfilling. □

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by David Lazear

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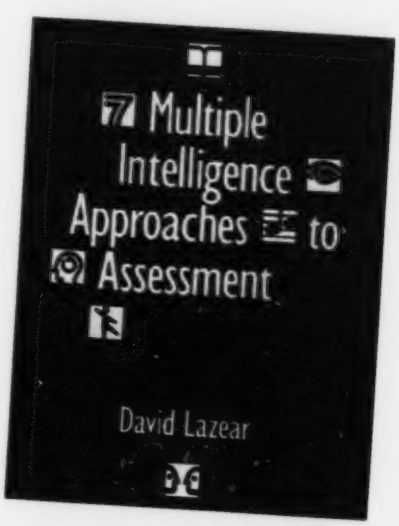

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